



To the Church in Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

The original readers of the book of Revelation might not have been surprised that the first of the letters addressed to believers in Asia Minor was the one written to the Church in Ephesus, the largest city of these seven locations and a significant religious and commercial site. 250,000 people lived in a city which was dominated by the famous Temple of Artemis, an impressive and striking building which was known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

By force of habit, we usually think of Revelation as being addressed to the 'early church,' but as we read this letter it's worth reminding ourselves that the community of believers in Ephesus had existed for over 40 years by the time of writing. The story of the church's birth can be found in Acts 19 and 20, which also help us understand just how hostile an environment Ephesus was for Christians. The significant number of people who turned to Jesus had the effect of reducing people's interest in the cult of the goddess Artemis (also known as Diana), and that, in turn, meant less people wanted to buy the silver shrines available from the temple. The craftsmen who profited from this business did not take these developments lying down. Acts 19:29 tells us that, 'Soon the whole city was in an uproar.'

Paul survived the riot which took place in Ephesus but left the city, later meeting with the church's elders at Miletus, an event recorded in Acts 20:13-38. In this encounter Paul warned the elders of the danger of false teaching taking people away from the faith: 'Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them' (v30), a concern which is also evident in the letter he later wrote to the church (see Ephesians 4:14).

In Revelation 2:1-3, Jesus offers words of approval in light of the way that the church has managed to remain faithful in spite of these dangers. False teachers have been tested and removed, and the Ephesians have persevered in a hostile climate.

However, this is not the whole story. Following the opening commendation, Jesus also offers words of correction. Although they have been faithful, the Ephesians 'have forsaken the love you had at first' (v4). The extent of Jesus concern is made clear in the strong warning found in verse 5. The church is described as having 'fallen,' a fate which is later used to describe Babylon (see Rev 18:2) while the reference to the possible removal of the church's lampstand seems to imply a threat to its very existence. Here is a reminder that love is not an optional extra or the 'icing on the cake' of church life, but something which is central to Christian belief and practice.

As with the other letters to the churches, the one addressed to Ephesus does not finish on a note of disapproval. Instead, a promise is made to those who 'hear'

change their ways in light of Jesus' teaching. The Ephesian Christians are told that their obedience will lead them to 'eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God' (v7). In the words of one commentator, 'The reward for the faithful is striking – they will participate in the blessing intended at creation but never realised by Adam and Eve.'¹

1. As we noted above, the Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian Christians on a number of occasions about the dangers of false teaching infiltrating their church. Can you think of ways today that we can make sure we don't become led astray in terms of our theology?
2. The Ephesians are also commended by Jesus for the fact that they 'have not grown weary' (v3). How are the warning signs, in your experience, of a weary church?
3. Many of us will know from experience that if we focus too much on truth and correct theology, we can easily forget that love is at the heart of the gospel. What steps can we take to make sure we're getting the right balance between love and truth?
4. In this letter, Jesus contrasts the current love of the Ephesian Christians with 'the love you had at first' (v4). Why is it that some people seem to retain their joy and love for God and others seem to lose it as time goes on? Are there any lessons we can learn when we think of people we've known who fit into these categories?
5. The warning offered by Jesus in verse 5 is particularly stark, the possible removal of the lampstand suggesting that the very existence of the church in Ephesus is at stake. How does the gravity of these words make you feel?

¹ Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 123